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## ABSTRACT

Eleven teachers of English in a large, private, English-medium school in India reflected on their beliefs, practices, and activities related to teaching English in India. In the survey, respondents freely acknowledged the premier position of English in academics and the world at large and unequivocally stated that their students should learn to communicate orally both among themselves and with other native speakers. However, oral and listening skills were not given much importance in the classroom. Teachers cited various barriers to implementing them: large class sizes inhibiting small group activities and increasing the noise level (leading to questions about discipline and classroom management); test-driven curricula; the low level of education of parents and their lack of mastery of English; and the predominance of the first language. Assessment and patterns of reporting student achievement did not accommodate learning oral skills. (Author/SM)

# ORAL ENGLISH SKILLS IN CLASSROOMS IN INDIA: TEACHERS REFLECT

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## **ORAL ENGLISH SKILLS IN CLASSROOMS IN INDIA: TEACHERS REFLECT**

### **Abstract**

Eleven teachers of English in a large private English-medium school in India reflected on their beliefs, practices and activities related to teaching English in India. In the survey, respondents freely acknowledged the premier position of English in academics and the world at large and unequivocally stated that their students should learn to communicate orally both among themselves and with other native speakers. Yet oral and listening skills were not given much importance in the classroom. Teachers cited various barriers to implementing them: Large class sizes inhibiting small group activities and increasing the noise level, leading to questions about discipline and classroom management; test-driven curriculum; the low level of education of parents and their lack of mastery of English; and the predominance of the first language. Neither did the assessment and patterns of reporting student achievement accommodate learning oral skills.

## **ORAL ENGLISH SKILLS IN CLASSROOMS IN INDIA: TEACHERS REFLECT**

Excellent teachers are reflective teachers who seek to find why and how students are learning or not learning. They are responsible for creating positive learning environments and attempt to assess which elements are working and which are lacking or interfering with learning. The challenge to provide individuals with appropriate instruction expands with an increase in diversity. While there are significant individual differences in classrooms that are rather homogeneous, these are magnified when students are linguistically diverse.

This article describes how a survey was designed and administered with a focus on aiding teachers reflect on their beliefs, practices and activities related to teaching English in India. The analysis provides suggestions for topics for workshops and professional development opportunities for teachers.

### **Methodology**

#### **Description Of School**

The setting is a K-12 private school in a metropolitan city in India with a total student strength of over 3,000. It is an English-medium school, committed to a language immersion approach with time-on-English tasks a priority. With the diversity of about five languages among students, teachers work to ensure English proficiency for success in all subject areas. However, a clear philosophy about bilingual or multilingual instruction such as a Transmission Model or Social Construction Model (Cox & Boyd-Batstone 1997) is not readily apparent.

All the teachers plan the curriculum together, follow a similar schedule, and use the same textbooks. At the end of every testing period, students in different sections of the same grade levels take common examinations set by the teachers in consultation with each other. However, there is very little time in the structure of teacher schedules for weekly meeting or team planning

sessions related to classroom activities. There is therefore little or no opportunity for teachers to reflect on the way they are presenting the English curriculum.

The elementary grades English teachers have not had any professional development for over 10 years. With a change in administration, there is a felt need in the institution for professional development and an examination of classroom teacher attitudes as well as teaching proficiency. Since the teachers in this private school are indeed serious about improving their teaching practices—and thus student achievement—they are willing to engage in reflection and staff development.

In the summer of 1999, the entire faculty of 11 teachers who taught all the English classes in grades 1-5, and impacted about 800 students, assembled to engage in reflection and assessment activities to determine ways to increase their effectiveness in the teaching of English. Since it can be difficult to objectively determine these elements, they were willing to collaborate with an education consultant/researcher.

As a native of India and a former teacher in the school, the principle researcher was familiar with the school and community culture, thus securing positive regard. She was able to gain trust and provide insights from the dual perspective of former teacher and now educational consultant/researcher.

### The Survey Instrument

As noted in Martella, Nelson and Marchand-Martella (1999, 472), “the goal of needs assessments is to identify the level of existing needs within an organization or program.” The assessment then allows program evaluators to “identify what resources are currently available to these individuals as part of their efforts to assess existing needs” (Martella, Nelson & Marchand-Martella 1999, 472). Decisions can then be made based on the responses from the needs

assessment. From this premise, the researcher prepared a survey to assess practices and needs of the teachers.

Since the purpose of the survey was to provide base-line data from which to evaluate current faculty practices, it was necessary that teachers provide thoughtful responses, rather than 'find fault' with current structures and practices. To encourage this, teachers were assured that their responses (a) were confidential, (b) would be reported anonymously, and (c) would be used to fashion workshops with a positive approach.

This was significant since in schools in India culturally teachers are not part of the larger decision-making process (World Bank, 1997). Recognizing that their input had a purpose that would result in increased student learning created for the teachers a positive climate in which there was an invitation, rather than a demand, to change.

Care was taken in structuring the instrument to allow for honest responses without making teachers feel defensive. The researcher felt it was important for the teachers to see that their responses and their willingness to engage in the staff development could be empowering in their perspective of professionalism and curriculum. The survey provided an opportunity for them to actually feel and record their success and recognize that all teachers individually had a base of support for their participation and reflection about their own teaching. Their responses would assist them in determining the portion of their teaching over which they had control, and the information would provide a basis for curriculum renewal.

The survey had 32 items with a mixture of open-ended and closed questions including prompts, providing for individual responses. It consisted of the following six sections: (a) beliefs about teaching English; (b) speaking and listening skills; (c) reading and writing skills; (d)

assignments and testing of students; (e) classroom focus – strategies used and limitations posed on instruction; and (f) a personal, professional profile of teacher behavior.

In assessing the need for teacher involvement and empowerment only two of the thirty-two questions deal with outside locus of control. This is significant since the researcher wanted the teachers to be reflective rather than critical. Questions that were not part of conditions and activities that support reflection, such as peer group or team meetings, workshops and other professional development opportunities, and print and non-print resources available to the teachers, were omitted from the survey since they were obviously not available in the school culture.

## **Results and Discussion**

### Purposes Of Studying English

Linguistic diversity in India is intensified by sheer numbers involved: There are 18 dominant regional languages recognized as official among the 845 major languages spoken in India (Pattanayak 1997; Saini 2000). English is the *lingua franca*, used for official and commercial business in the country. It is therefore perceived as a requirement for upward social and economic mobility and lack of fluency in English reading, writing, speaking and listening would affect personal and professional advancement. The ultimate purpose of English instruction should be to increase fluency and thus to provide upward mobility opportunities for the students (Aggarwal 1991).

While the regional language may be the medium of instruction in most state-run schools, English is taught as a third language (Saini 2000). However, most private schools aim at making their students English-“able. “ They are considered elite since English is the primary language of instruction (Aggarwal 1991).

As with all teaching, purpose is central to the task. Teachers' perceptions of the intrinsic and instrumental purposes of teaching English in their school would be significant since that will influence curricular, instructional and assessment emphases.

Results of the survey showed clearly that the teachers held the beliefs that students "should learn to communicate freely (in) and to understand (English)". They were well aware of the importance of English internationally and in India as "a common language throughout the world spoken by 1/10<sup>th</sup> of human population" and "the first language in our country (India)." They acknowledged its place as "the best medium of communication between people of different nationalities," "the language of the international aviation" and "the unofficial first language of international sports." The instrumental value placed on the language was obvious in statements such as English helps us "to exploit the various opportunities offered all around the globe" and "to keep pace with developments in science, technology and other fields of study."

In this broader understanding of how ability in the language can open doors for their students, the teachers did not lose sight of their students' need to master the language as a requirement for success in the school. As one respondent candidly said, "It helps the pupils a lot to learn subjects like science, social studies, etc."

The intrinsic value of learning English did not feature widely in the responses. The only response that addressed it was an acknowledgement that English has "the richest lexicon."

#### Place Of Oral And Listening Skills In A Classroom

The phenomenon of additive bilingualism, which states that "bilingual student who read well in one language usually also read well in the other language" (Cox & Boyd-Batstone 1997, p. 34), should assist in positive transfer of language. However, students sometimes can converse in more than one language and yet lack some conceptual understandings that make it difficult for



them to use a particular for academic success (Cox & Boyd-Batstone, 1997). It is understandable that language facility is increased the more often the target language is used. In this immersion-learning environment the focus and time on-task needs to be in the use of the target language, which is English. Teachers must therefore be effective instructors of English, if students are to be academically successful in the whole curriculum.

To increase fluency, teachers would like students to use English outside the classroom “in every possible circumstance.” These include “communicating with their friends and teachers,” dialoguing with “students of other cultures speaking languages other than their own,” or “convers(ing) with anybody who is comfortable with the language.” Apart from social communication, teachers note that students need oral skills to be successful in “school competitions, functions and other extra-curricular activities.”

Despite the overwhelming insistence placed on oral and listening skills as a reason for teaching and learning English, they were not given much importance in the classroom. On an average, for 10 minutes of every 40 minutes of class, teachers did not use the target language of English. Five of them (almost 50%) used 15 minutes of class time communicating with students in the regional language Tamil rather than English, representing about 40% of class time. Another five teachers indicated that they used eight minutes of instruction in Tamil to communicate with students, which equates to 20% of the class time.

The reflection of the teachers on their activities and strategies help them establish what they were currently doing to aid in English fluency and thus provide a place to begin thinking about the effectiveness of their classrooms. Most of the activities are structured and teacher initiated or teacher-directed as when they read stories aloud to the class, give directions for an activity or conduct dictation tests. Students are encouraged to articulate in controlled situations

such as spelling aloud, reading aloud a word written on the board or reciting a poem. However, when they respond to questions asked by the teacher or narrate a story in their own words they formulate their own language. Certain instructional strategies, for example pair work, role-play and dramatizing situations, require the active use of oral and listening skills.

### Problems With Incorporating Oral And Listening Skills In The Classroom

While all the teachers acknowledged the need to incorporate more oral activities in their curriculum and classrooms, they also cited various barriers to implementing them. Large class sizes ranging from 40 to 50 students inhibit small group activities which increase the noise level, leading to questions about discipline and classroom management.

Certain structural aspects of the program were also cited as not conducive to teaching oral and listening skills. That tests drive curriculum appears to be a reality in this context. The respondents said that since the exams were a major part of the school culture, they could not concentrate on anything that the exam structure did not support or include. This “exam-oriented approach” defined their curriculum and their classroom activities. The school also has assignments every two weeks which are pencil-and-paper tests focused on reading and writing. The traditional approach to evaluation precludes using oral and listening assessments. Perhaps the recent change in administration will encourage re-vamping the assessment system.

In this school where the drop out rate is very low, almost nil, teachers trace the lack of such mastery of the curriculum and teaching to the pre-primary grades. If a considerable number of students enter primary (elementary) grades without being adequately trained in English in the pre-primary classes, the cumulative effect of low entry-level skills may account for the continued use of regional language in all grades. This makes the gradual phasing out of the regional language difficult, and the low incidence of English persists at all levels.

The level of education of parents and their mastery of English are reflected in the students' use of the language. One respondent noted, "For some students, parents are not educated. So they find it difficult to speak and listen in English." The parents are not able to provide significant opportunities for their children to hear and practice the language, which in turn affects the fluency level. A lack of exposure to the language outside the classroom detracts from the students' ability to attain a level of expertise that teachers find necessary to build upon within the curriculum and structure of the class.

The last issue relates to the relationship between the first language, which in this case may be the regional language or the mother tongue of the student, and the second language, English. Respondents acknowledged that learning English may be affected by (a) the students' unfamiliarity with it, (b) interference of the first language, and (c) negative transfer from the first language. Students may have inhibitions about speaking in English since many of them do not come from English-speaking backgrounds. As one teacher succinctly remarked, "The mother tongue of the child is not English. He finds it difficult to comprehend, thereby causing loss of confidence."

#### Assessment of Oral and Listening Skills

Regarding assessment of listening and oral skills, eight of the 11 teachers said that they spent no time or 0% of class time assessing listening skills. Two of the teachers said maybe 10% of their time was spent on listening comprehension. One teacher did not respond to the question.

None of the assignments focused on speaking skills. Therefore, there was no basis from which to evaluate oral language. Teacher expectations and behavior affect student learning. With a lack of specific expectation for speaking and listening skill levels there is nonsystematic

assessment of proficiency. Therefore, it is less likely that students will focus on the significance of the task.

## **Conclusions**

### Areas of Concern

Once teachers recognize their behavior and acknowledge their expectations for students, adjustments are more likely to be made in curriculum content and in overall use of classroom time. Assisting teachers in the art of reflection can yield significant changes for more effective classrooms as teachers explore dilemmas by thinking and collecting evidence, then acting upon that evidence (Ross, Bondy & Kyle 1993).

The survey identified three major areas of concern. First, English does not appear to have much intrinsic value for the teachers who more readily see the instrumental value of the language in the lives of their students. If intrinsic motivation makes a life-long learner, it is necessary for the teachers to communicate it to the students and enable them to transfer their skills to other content areas.

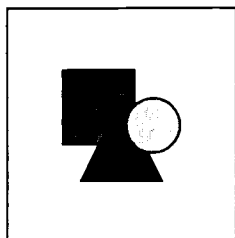
A second concern relates to the curriculum and teaching method. The respondents appear to use limited activities to encourage oral and listening skills. The text and the set material dictate the classroom procedures. While this is common in such settings, the teachers need to find a fit between the purposes they espouse and the experiences they design for the students.

Assessment is a key issue in all educational policies. The lack of assessment and reporting of English oral skills in the school system is a comment on how low on a scale of importance these skills are placed, and creates a divide between purpose and implementation. This in turn causes teachers to see their students achieving less than they should, leading to professional dissatisfaction and frustration.

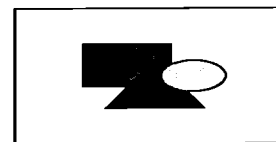
While there is cause for concern regarding the curriculum and the dissonance between purposes and methods of teaching oral English fluency, it is encouraging that the teachers are willing to reflect honestly and deeply about their practice. In subsequent levels of professional development in which they may engage, workshops need to be conducted by a leader / consultant in an inclusive and non-threatening manner. Having taken the first step in analyzing their status, the faculty is poised to effect necessary changes to make teaching and learning successful for themselves and their students.

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